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U.S. Mercenaries Escape Brazil to Tell of Their Effort Toward African Coup

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SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 26 — Two American mercenaries have escaped from a Brazilian prison and returned to the United States to tell a tangled tale of a foiled effort to overthrow the Government of Ghana.

The two men, Timothy M. Carmody of San Francisco and Steven W. Hedrick of Ocala, Fla., were among eight Americans arrested 10 months ago off Brazil, with a ship bearing six tons of weapons. They say they were headed for the West African country to join in a coup attempt aimed at the military Government of Lieut. Jerry Rawlings.

Mr. Carmody and Mr. Hedrick said in interviews today that they believed they were participating in a plan sanctioned by the United States Government and led by Godfrey Osei, a Ghanaian dissident and expatriate living in the New York City borough of Queens. Mr. Osei led a failed coup attempt in 1983.

Mr. Carmody, a Vietnam veteran and a co-founder of the Rhodesia Veterans Association, a group of Americans who worked as private soldiers in Rhodesia in the late 1970's, said that once in Ghana, they were to meet with supporters of Mr. Osei who would attack the capital city of Accra while the Americans attempted to free Ghanaian nationals jailed on charges that they were working covertly for the Central Intelligence Agency.

C.I.A. Says It's 'Ridiculous'

The same story is told by Mr. Hedrick, who said that "sources" he would not name had sent him coded messages in jail that reassured him that the job had the sanction of the American Government. "I thought I had the blessing of my country," Mr. Hedrick said of the work he signed on to do in Ghana. He said he felt "abandoned" by the Government in his 10 months in various jails in Brazil.

But George Lauder, a C.I.A. spokesman, today denied that the agency had anything to do with an effort to overthrow the Government of Ghana, with which Washington has had strained relations. "Their charges are ridiculous," he said of the men's comments today.

Pete Martinez, a State Department spokesman, said today that he had "no information at all" on the men and was not aware of their whereabouts.

Mr. Hedrick and Mr. Carmody said they were determined to locate Mr. Osei and to speak to a Texas commodities broker who arranged for the sale of arms to the group, in an effort to sort out the information they were given.

Effort to Avoid Extradition

Though their conviction on arms-smuggling charges was overturned by a Brazilian appeals court, four of the eight Americans escaped from a prison in Brasilia Dec. 15, before they could be extradited to Argentina, where the arms had been purchased and where they faced charges of illegally exporting military material. Mr. Carmody and Mr. Hedrick, along with Sheldon W. Ainsworth of Omaha, arrived in the United States Thursday. Frederick T. Verduin of Santa Rosa, Calif., separated from the others shortly after the escape and did not accompany them home.

Those who remain imprisoned in Brasilia are John Early of Albuquerque, Robert E. Foti of New York City, and Julio Rodriguez Larrazabal and Steven Villa Sosa, both of Fayetteville, N.C.

According to Mr. Carmody, who was a graduate student in international relations at San Francisco State University, he was recruited for the mission by Mr. Early and Mr. Foti, fellow Vietnam veterans who also worked as private soldiers in Rhodesia.

Mr. Early is particularly well known in the shadowy fraternity of adventurers, mercenaries and arms dealers operating out of this country. Several people who know him say he has been involved in clandestine activities in Laos in the 1960's and more recently in El Salvador.

Lawyer Claimed C.I.A. Tie

Mr. Early was also convicted in Federal District Court in San Diego in 1981 of conspiracy to smuggle marijuana for his role in a large drug-smuggling operation. According to Mr. Early's defense attorney, quoted in an article in The San Diego Union at the time, the Central Intelligence Agency intervened in the case to insure that Mr. Early's connections to the C.I.A. were not mentioned during his trial.

It was Mr. Early who was to lead the group of eight in the mission to overthrow the military Government of Ghana and install Mr. Osei as President.

According to Mr. Hedrick, the eight recruits assembled in the Miami airport on Feb. 13 and flew to Buenos Aires where they were met by Ted Bishop, a commodities broker from Texas. He said Mr. Bishop, who arranged for the purchase of weapons from Argentine Government factories, introduced the men to Mr. Osei.

Reached at his office in Farmersville, Tex., Mr. Bishop acknowledged arranging the purchase of arms on behalf of Mr. Osei, whom he said he had known for about two years. He said he believed that Mr. Osei had proper documentation for the legal purchase of the weapons.

Coffee Deal in Exchange

Mr. Bishop said his fee for the deal was an agreement that he would be the exclusive broker for coffee and other products from Ghana should Mr. Osei successfully take over the Government.

Members of Mr. Osei's family answering the phone at his apartment in Queens have, over the past several weeks, said he was not there and it was not known when he might return. When the same telephone number was called today, an unidentified voice said "wrong number" and hung up.

Daniel C.K. Gyabaah, counselor at the Embassy of Ghana in Washington, said today that his Government was aware that the three mercenaries had returned to the United States. But he said he knew of no plans by his Government in response to the escape.

Mr. Hedrick says that Mr. Osei told them that a New York City businessman named "Solomon" had helped Mr. Bishop raise \$500,000 to finance the weapons purchase, and that Mr. Bishop and Mr. Osei, when in Argentina to buy the weapons, had called "Solomon" in New York.

A New York City commodities broker who has had business dealings with Mr. Bishop, Solomon Schwartz, is currently charged in an unrelated 14-count Federal racketeering indictment involving the illegal export of weapons.

Says He Didn't Know Them

But Mr. Schwartz, in a recent interview, said he had no involvement with the Ghana plot and did not know the men arrested in Brazil.

He acknowledged that he had a business relationship with Ted Bishop, whom he said had asked him about two years ago to try to work out some commodities trading deals on produce from Mexico. He said that he met Mr. Bishop in New York City on one occasion and that Mr. Bishop called him from Argentina attempting to organize the sale of coffee, a deal that was never finalized.

"This fellow, Ted Bishop, as I understand it, knew those people," Mr. Schwartz said of the mercenaries convicted in Brazil. "But I had no connection with any of those people."

Mr. Schwartz and the three other defendants in the racketeering case have pleaded not guilty in Federal District Court in Brooklyn. They also filed a motion asking that they be permitted to argue at their trial that their actions

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were authorized by the Government. In a ruling in September, Judge Thomas C. Platt Jr. wrote that Mr. Schwartz "had a relationship with certain agencies of the United States Government," but he denied the defense request, based on Government officials' testimony in a closed hearing.

Sale of Night-Vision Equipment

Among the charges against the defendants are that they agreed to illegally ship sophisticated night-vision equipment to the Soviet Union and that Mr. Schwartz illegally exported night-vision equipment made by Litton Industries to the Government of Argentina during the 1982 Falkland Islands war with Britain.

A businessman who distributes Lit-

ton night-vision equipment on the East Coast, Wally Grasheim, once employed two of the mercenaries arrested in Brazil, Steven Villa Sosa and Julio Rodriguez Larrazabal, to demonstrate such equipment in El Salvador, according to Betty Sosa, Mr. Sosa's wife.

Mr. Carmody, Mr. Hedrick and Mrs. Sosa all say that while the men were jailed in Brazil, Mr. Grasheim traveled there to attempt to intercede in their behalf.

At Mr. Grasheim's office in Manhattan, an associate, Carmine Pelosi, said Mr. Grasheim was out of town and could not be reached. But he said he knew all of Mr. Grasheim's associates and that he had never heard of Mr. Sosa or Mr. Rodriguez.